

AN INDIAN ASS

By the same author

AQUARIUM

AN INDIAN ASS

BY

HAROLD ACTON

“ Ha ha ! ha ha ! this world doth pass
Most merrily, I'll be sworn ;
For many an honest Indian ass
Goes for an Unicorn.

Ty hye ! ty hyc ! O sweet delight !
He tickles this age that can
Call Tullia's ape a marmosyte
And Leda's goose a swan.”



DUCKWORTH

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Lament for Adonis

NOW fogs enfold the sea
And berries fall from eaves,
The cat's eyes glitter green into the dark.
• The sloping hills of myrrh,
The trees with tender anise overweighed,
The pointed flag-leaves stir
Only to weep again,
Only to sob and mourn Adonis dead.

Throughout this dolorous night of cloudy jade
Even the hornless dragon of the sea,
The green and golden sequined basilisk,
The water-scorpion and the python-king
Like sad eclipses trail about the land.
The crane, the ibis and the mango-bird,
The jungle-fowl, the heron and the roc,
The badger and three-footed tortoise join
In pouring out their eyes.

O Cypris violet-stoled, O wrapped in purple woof
Arise and beat your azure-veined breasts !
Small jewelled nipples, bleed !
For I have seen you make that curvèd mouth
A bed of balsam, bed of crisp lush flowers,
Whose poor crushed frozen lips compactly closed
Lie, flakes of ice, where once were flakes of fire,
Their loveliness a thing of agony.

The moon has slanted off, and querulous ghosts
Hover along the brink of treacherous voids
And leap into this night of blinded eyes
(Blind now to pleasure's lapping ecstasies) ;
This peacock-throated night whose stifling cries
Shudder and crack : 'tis Misery who calls
"Woe" to the black solemnities of sky
For loveliest Adonis—he is dead.

Low on the hills he lies, the lovely bleeding one,
His throat aflash with faint stunned strands of light.
Low on the hills he lies and breathes his life away
And from his thigh of milk-white agate gashed,
 Slit by the cruel tusk,
The ruby blood drips down his skin of snow.
Beneath his brows stars set in crystal deep
(Once memories, hungers glinted in their pools),
Are glazed dim, opaque and lustreless,
The blue orbs burn no more beneath translucent lids.
His locks are wet with the clear drops of night,
The rose has fled his lip : the very kiss hangs dead,
The kiss that Cypris never will forego.

And when the bitter white wind breaks the morn,
His gathered hounds bay gloom about his corpse,
The green-haired Nereids of the marsh make moan,
Frail flowers dabble pollened cheeks with tears,
From vavice to calyx petals weep . . .

Long spiral tufts of drooping galingale,
The shadowy deer-grass and the swallow-wort
Sob through their bat's wing tissues tremulous,
The poplars weeping amber in the vales,
The orchises and sandal-trees, lament.

But Aphrodite with unbraided hair
And tragic thorn-pierced feet so delicate,
Calls through the woodlands and again, again.
O, more than music's many stringèd charms,
His lulling name reverberates afar
Where faint sails clasp the ribbands of the sea.
But round his navel leaps the thick dark blood,
His chest is lapped in scarlet from the thighs,
Now purpled are those limbs afore as white
As veils of snow unflecked by merest breeze.

Cypris was fair : whilst her Adonis lived
The light would melt her body into song,
But with Adonis has her beauty died,
Died as a vaporous melody on a lute.
“ Woe, woe, for Cypris ! ” all the mountains call,
The oak-trees answer : “ For Adonis, woe ! ”
For Aphrodite all the rivers weep,
The wells bewail Adonis on the hills.
Echo resounds “ Ai, ai . . . Adonis dead . . .
Most beautiful Adonis . . . he is dead.”
As Venus saw the wasting limbs, the wound

Gashed in the whiteness of her loved one's thighs,
She clasped him to her, moaning supply warm
Against his chilled inertness :

“ Farewell, Adonis ; once, as I was telling
Deluding tales of happiness, the morrow,
When I had thought that joy had come for dwelling,
Came sorrow.

“ The almoner of death, the silent creeper,
Has snared my love, and I shall see him never,
I, manacled in miseries, a weeper
For ever.

“ A widowed goddess with her beauty setting
Like a gold sun to rise no longer, never,
Whose love, with Acheron, is fast forgetting
Her for ever.”

For each blood drop the Paphian sheds a tear,
And tears and blood on earth are turned to flowers :
The ruby blood brings forth the pursy rose,
The tears bring forth the air-white wind-flower,
For loveliest Adonis—he is dead.

No seemly couch, this lonely bed of leaves
For dead Adonis : beautiful in death
As one that stumbles on a slumber, falls
On downy-wingèd doze of braided air.

Your bed let him possess, O Cytherea,
Lay him to sleep on couch of twisted gold,
The couch that yearns for wan Adonis' limbs.
Cast on him drooping eyes of jasmine-flowers,
Nay, all the flowers have faded in his death,
As keen swift lovely murmurs drowned on breeze.
Sprinkle his limbs with bakkaris and myrrh,
Nay, perished all the perfumes in his death,
All flushed soft legendary scents dissolve—
Disquieting erotic memories.

The torches on the lintel all are quenched
And Hymenæus rends the bridal crown.
No more the song is “Hymen” : a new song
The Graces grieve like mournful Autumn boughs,
The toneless sound that means a broken heart :
“Woe, for Adonis, son of Cinyrus !”
To him the Muses chant their starry music,
And painted insects floating motionless
At their weird sound, unconscious of the day,
Bright feathered wings hung in the gloom of thought
Mimic the melancholy atmosphere
And dry words start and rattle in the throat,
Shudder in sorrow ; but he does not heed.

The bending vault of stars,
Of cool green quiet stars,

Where clouds but catch the palest tinge of day,
Is tangled with the sea ;
The moonlight tossed and thrown by jostling waves
Refrain from dirges, cease,
O Cypris, your lament.
Again you must bewail another year !

When Frigates from Long Voyages . . .

WHEN frigates from long voyages
Drift into harbour, then I see
Whirled momentary mirages
Of inspissated greenery—
Mazed mangroves casting their aerial roots,
And diamond water-shoots
Embroidering the air.
And in the drowsy hanging-gardens there
Roam slowly-swaying elephants ;
The fulgorant phoenix with her sycophants,
Those trailing-plumèd birds of paradise,
Sits on a cactus thorn.
And gleaming in the ruby-veined morn
Lie pools of liquid amber for the indolent croco-
dile
To flounder in and dolorously smile.
Spick diving gannets, speckled pelicans,
Flutter with feather-footed ptarmigans.
Orange-liveried marmosets
Climb slender cypress minarets.
Strange garrisons
Of emerald-mailed chameleons,
And peacocks, fans outspread as gonfalons,
Shrill-voiced as amazons ;
Coiled dinosaurs that lap the hydromel
From many a mauve-lipped shell . . .

The unicorns are neighing from afar,
Where hills of cinnabar
Loom high
Like venomous Borgia-philtres on the sky.

Capriccio Espagnol

“ Y entre puente y otro puente
Zaragoza es my tierra.”

O F blood blown-dry brown velvet, baldaquins,
Words guttural—then soft as dulcimers :
Of rays of rapid light through fishes' fins
Prisoned in tanks profound where nothing stirs ;
Of nights that ooze weird sounds, and starry eyes
On lattice fixed and bulging balconies :—

Of these my brain built castles rapidly,
And tolled metallic like a beaten bell
Of hard green copper ; straggling aimlessly
Over ravine and granite citadel
Were cities unpremeditated, dry,
As draughts of space inhaled from scorching sky.

Through these Cathedrals rose like cachalots
Twisted of height and gloom and sudden glow.
Their glossy floors reflect the crimson cloths
Of vestment swirling, swishing to and fro—
And when the beadle taps his ponderous mace
Faint echoes rustle from the Altar's lace.

Within the town : feeble electric light
Among the dusty foliage of the trees,
Like gentle cheeks against the steely night,

With boughs of thick smooth silver ; jubilees
Of saints are frequent—in their thoughtfulness
The citizens will give their saint a dress.

They lift her from the gilded canopy,
Studded in far Peru, on which she stands,
Sumptuous, realistic, in each eye

A gaping jewel ; sprouting from her hands
Are paper flowers—in their thoughtfulness
They give their saint a new magenta dress.

The ceremony done, and people doff
Their piety : serrated streets resound
With gossip, vacuous laughter, idle scoff.
Like strips of tape the scattered crowds confound,
Mantillas and a rout of dusky hair,
Stray thoughts jerk off and clatter in the air. . . .

Austere this land, and yet it utters flesh :
The longing ache of contact, lids like song
And lips like speech melodious : a mesh
For Don Juans and sanguine passions ; strong
This earth of sprinkled blood, the seed of gold,
Whose tainted glitters dazzle young and old !

Jagged umber ridges freaked with lines of snow,
Bitumen lakes, austere as faded fire,
And vague waste lands where gypsies squatting low

Croon winged abandoned musics that expire
Like bruised sweet herbs, gushed madness, agonies
Of lances hurled at pulseless arteries.

•
Like vapours anchored to a mountain's thigh

• Legioned, remote and abstract, yet withal
Evocative of an infinity—

Beauty becoming metaphysical—

This Phœnix-land breeds new birds in the brain
From ash, for I have never been to Spain.

Trépak

THE trees sprawl up like trumpets in the night,
Great ghosts of once-viridian : but now,
Fibred with brittle tufts of massy snow,
They creak with burdened whiteness, for the
bright
Blue-prismed stalactites like wounds of light
Are pendulous from their pagoda-boughs.
And when a wind whirs in among the trees,
As some Silenus fumbling frantic hands
Into a cleft of honey, they cast off
A whittling dust of little hispid stars.
The moon is hungry. Lo ! the moon has thinned
To finger-nail's fine fringe ; she is forlorn
With thought of Spring's flown hollow spells of
joy,
When the now-passionless statue of her mind
Was tremulous with passion, nescient lips
Stammered lush ingenuities of love.
Then Summer crackled like a yawn of fire :
The big-lipped consummation of desire.
A starved, lean-ribbed dog with rheumy eyes
Yelps up at her, his poor thin thread of voice
Nigh snaps, and trails its note into a growl,
Then tumbles, frozen stark, amongst the snow.
The barbèd minutes shiver chillily
In wait for something.

Ho ! who's this, a man ?
In this torn catafalque of barren boughs ?
A patriarchal bearded brittle-bones
Daft, dazed with drink, shuffles his slipshod feet . . .
Scattering sprays of crisply sparkling snow.
Death clanks his rusty mail and flaps his wings
And ogling, draws the man into a dance :

“ No more the malady of life unlived
With no grand-opera effects ; no more
Heroic sunsets, agonies of rose
To wear you faint ; no more the whirlpool’s mist
Of good and evil. It shall be revealed
There is no meaning, no significance
In all this clamour, in this viscous trail
Of sentimental sanatoriums.
Those frowning stoic caryatides,
Who contemplate in decorous solitude
This elegant Golgotha of futile birth,
Are fraudulent mountebanks ; unmanicured,
Life’s pointed nails grapple and tear your flanks
Without a murmur trembling from your lips,
O broken vessel sprayed with broken light,
Come to oblivion’s arms ; sepulchral night,
Inchoate truth await you—they are kind.
Close your red lashless eyelids. Death is fair . . . ”

The Investiture of a Spinster Hob-Goblin

O H have you heard the chaunt of snails
Tilting upon a big brown leaf,
And held the insect world in fief
And pared the devil's gilded nails ?

And have you parlied with the rose,
And seen the ballet of the bats
And watched the sloths, our acrobats,
Performing at our antic-shows ?

And have you drunk the tears of stars,
And bathed in bubbles of the moon,
And heard the gay grasshoppers croon,
Who use their bodies as guitars ?

Then, if you've seen the phœnix land
Or if a satyr's beard you've sown,
And filed the eye-brows of a faun,
We will admit you to our band.

The hedonistic unicorns,
Who drive our chariots through the sky,
Will lead you to our empery
Of languid dappled damson dawns.

The Were-Wolf

ALL in the hush of a green night,
He left the downy marriage-bed
In a chill sweat, his face chalk-white,
His voice spoke hoarsely of the dead.

The young wife, wakened by his howls,
Clutched bed-post dumb with fright, surprise ;
Like lepers huddled under cowls,
Red films lay on her husband's eyes.

"I am become a wolf," he said,
"And I will to the churchyard-site
To throttle graves, to raise the dead.
Strange flesh will be my fare to-night !"

And barking at the slice of moon
He scampered nimbly on all fours.
She never saw him more ; one noon
She spied the imprint of wolf's claws.

Hilarity

COME, let us sing the world's hilarity,
Now that a silence overspreads the hills.
Each crevice, muscle, wimpling in a haze,
Blue-ragged fustian of twilight : come
And crack the sky with laughter, mounting shrill,
Let it dissolve the æther, let it break
In bubbles, circles ever-bosoming,
As when a trout has troubled a still pool.

Scatter it like a hungry pack of hounds,
Worry and tear and grind it into strips,
Ravish and tread on it, then let it be
To crawl before us like the ooze of oil,
A worm of shame, a mean and squamous thing.

Hysteria, guide us ! Let our laughter heave,
Swell shriek on shriek, till it engender fear
Like peacocks in abandoned palaces
Whose sharp and melancholy discords ring
And rinse like lightning through the vaulted roofs
At sunset hour, when skies are smeared with blood.
Come, drown the viol's pallid amber notes,
Submerge the fevered pluckings at the lute,
Let no soft rippling cadences be spilled,
But beat a riot out upon the drums.
Fescennine gongs shall kindle us to blaze,

And thus our fumes, well ballasted, will steer
Towards the placid stars and make them reel.

Our lives are cratered with great pocks and scabs,
Meticulously morselled into pangs,
Birth-scream, death-rattle, straggling years between,
Of childhood and uneasy puberty,
Of adolescence and maturity,
Resolve tormented into slow decay,
Crabbed, argued, rheumatic, cough our lives away.
And some, less fortunate, cough up their blood.

Then let us sing the world's hilarity !
With plunging pistons let our laughter press,
Lumbering in massed squadrons, vitriol
To blister the anæmic orb of moon.
And there are many hours before the dawn.
The hilewort, nightshade, agrimony-wand
Surrender to the fingers of the breeze,
Lay bare their throats, let loose their floating hair.

Some luckless women bear their children blind
And some hare-lipped and others lunatick
With soft and fumbling brains and shifting eyes,
Who dandle curly flowers, their lolling tongues
Clicking and moist with unrestrained saliva.
Perhaps 'twere better that they were born blind,
Never to see the ugliness of man,

The mirrors of his noisome, clammy thoughts,
Like night-grown fungi pushing on the air,
But hold sweet music palpable, and sounds,
Tones, undertones : a paradise of hues,
And glowing forms in silk embroideries.

The silence, too, will seem a rhythmic motion,
A saraband for snow-white feet to tread,
And not a tortured cripple crouching low
Amongst the blotting shadows of his soul,
To nurse his agony with evil oaths,
The blight-scarred sickly vapours of remorse,
Sputtered and writhing from his twisted lips.

Were a revolver fired with loud report,
The only music welcome to our ears,
The poor blind man would tremble, clutch a chair . . .

Day after day the limbs of man are gnawed
And flayed by every manner of disease,
Eaten of lice, they seem the spawn of slugs,
And cancer slowly scrabbles at their vitals.
The small-pox ploughs their faces into ruts
And scurvy furrows, strange deformities
Distend and hunch them into monstrous shapes,
Like shadows gripping at realities,
To scrape a livid grave amongst the slime.
Some calcined ashen white with leprosy

Will scream for terror at their dreadful hands,
The touch of which would seem to cause decay
The roots they tear, the pappy fruit they pluck,
And prowling beasts will turn in haste and flee
Before their weary footsteps through the night.

Our quickened hearts have grated on themselves,
We groan with lappered morphews of the mind,
Our wanton mirth has frozen into sorrow,
And we had thought to fashion of our joy
Round crackling pearls to pelt our wine-drenched
loves.

But we were to have sung hilarity !

Our clowns are turned into tragedians,
And Pierrot's chalk-white face is crinkled up
With bitter weeping ; roguish Harlequin,
His apple cheeks all wet and blobbed with tears,
Wanders the streets of Bergamo alone.
And floating through the utter silences,
Our sobs well hugely, spasms echoing
To jeer and mock at us, abortive fools,
Who came to sing the world's hilarity.

The Gods

LIGHTNING zigzags and again
Comets reel like tipsy girls,
Bulbous clouds let down the rain,
Little silver chains of pearls.

Through the frenzied city beats
A bourdon-drumming, heavy, low.
In long and apoplectic streets
The gods are passing to and fro.

I watch them walk among the crowds,
Their beards a-glittering with stars,
Until they merge into the clouds
Among the chimney's fat cigars.

While lovers in their foolishness
Lisp out the night with hopes and fears,
Whilst into void and emptiness
Time clatters off and disappears.

As Dmitri Karamazoff sang on the way to Chaos

EIGHT days without a sun : but I am calm
E. And cultivate my tulips fixedly,
I watch them flick their flighty freckled tongues
Mocking and sweetly monstrous blares of time.
(We weep to see you haste away so soon !)
The gas is near extinct upon the plush,
Like the last birds its flares have ebbed away.
Blue witness of the Second Empire, gas !—
In cabriolets we echoed through the night
And caracoled with busselled courtesans—
You lit the boulevards and avenues,
While Paul Verlaine, a candle in his hand,
Would totter up to bed and watch the moon
Comme un point sur un i—so orotund. . . .
Through fumes and crapulous velleities.

But now the batteries like headaches beat
Against the temples of humanity ;
A network of pure electricity
Installed for quick transmission through the world
Pours a perpetual electric day.
Men plough their fields by searchlights from the skies,
By searchlights blatant, geometrical,
As fingers from each god-like aeroplane
Pointed to each created mass of flesh
Accusing and forewarning.

O empresses of jade who slumber on your cushions,
Who slumber delicately on your cushions !
If we were moulded of a subtle stone
Instead of being merely flesh and bone,
We'd imitate your cool and elegant curves.
To chill green jade our hot and shattered nerves
Would clot or petrify or fossilize—
And moss to moist the finnèd lids of eyes,
Lush velvet soaking on the irises
Looped round with tiredness and its swollen reds
Would grow about our damask four-post beds.
We would be green, an ecstasy of green !
As small sea-violets, virgin forest's green,
Where trees like coral sponges dab the air,
And through each weft you hear a piece of wind,
A tiny concertina-push of sound
And then an inrush, sobbing gently inward.

Why do we drown in customs, why become
Lost dying flames and strangers to the skies
Whose beams with clouds like wingèd chariots fly ?
Why do we climb the towers which break our knees,
Horrible towers from which, when we look down
We wish to hurl ourselves ?
O, then the ant-like herd below would feel
A gentle spray of entrails—they'd recoil !—
Perhaps one woman faints : we do not care,

The worm has not become our paramour,
The worm has not yet pierced our winding-sheets.

Then why not, like Empedocles,
Lower our limbs into volcano-craters,
And make the world believe that mighty God
Translated us into His company
On dolphins' backs across a nectar lake,
To share the glory of His attributes,
His love like myrrh and incense and the fruits
That dangle from exotic herbs and trees
All gold and ripe as from Hesperides ?

An architect of ruin onion-eyed
Like some fierce tyrant in old tapestry
Has cast the die of quick finality
Among the cheese-mites in this gap of time.
Through Chaos : murmurs, stumblings, hordes that
rend
The fabric which is called reality.
The light, which was a sluice of molten gold,
The crystal winds, disperse in empty air.

The deep red empty holes which were our eyes
Sense only burstings of electric globes.
Louder the heat, like vitriol, wounds our ears
Burning with dull blue thunder.

And then—a tune upon the piccolo,
One of the musical Unemployed, I know,
Or some stray angel with pink sugar wings
Trying to see the cheerful side of things !

In the Train de Luxe

“ **I**T is dangerous to lean out of the window.”

No doubt, when meteors shoot athwart the night.

No doubt, no doubt ; and yet it haunts the sight.

I read, re-read this ponderous advice

In French and English ; play a game of dice
With mental clouds through cannonades of hours,
With foamless islands legioned with lush flow'rs,
Prismatic juicy glades bee-pasturing.

“ In case of danger you must pull the ring.”

A girl arranges a mellifluous grin :

Eternal teas and afternoons begin

To lurk within the forests of the mind

With vividness that cuts it like a wind.

And while my nostrils draw the vital air,

They quiver to discern the sweat of hair

In awkward crevices ! *Signal d'Alarme*

Recalls the fact that I am safe from harm.

I count, re-count each pendulum and beat.

Pardie ! the train has swollen in the heat ;

Freighted with smuts he heaves his metal breasts,
Nor heeds the broad and burning moon's behests.

(The moon is lingering and luminous.

Mired in a wrinkling silk diaphanous

She floats a supple pose upon the air
And whispers invitations.)

“ I don’t care ! ”

The train replies ; although his body glows,
He is austere as tempest-sifted snows,
Pursuing moral dumb-bell exercise
To muscle-burst criterion ; he defies
Flesh and its shuddering spurts of harlotry.
Pavilioned on hills of chastity,
“ I do not care a damn,” the train replies.

The Prodigal Son

THE young man yawned with feigned inconstancy
Of manner ; boredom exquisite ; a fence
To hide the quick explosions in his soul.
He sucked at his surroundings, and the whole
Grim agony of his dull youth returned,
The blue fins of his sullen eyelids burned,
He could have mouthed a curse, an oath obscene :
For horror at the glib familiar scene
A clayey lump stuck blistered in his throat.
Chrysallic faces, garlic, myosote,
And rows of beans and artichokes, a field
Interminably patterned, jigged and reeled
Along the corridors of memory.

“ Is childhood happy ? dismal fallacy !
And yet I am not one of those who think
That lilies smell not, orange-flowers stink.”
Here had the best hours coolly leaked away
Like driblets from a tap, a disarray
Of tumbled hispid stars ; a clean dry sleep
Of stunted senses, where he could not weep
For ignorance. And ever shone the moon ;
The warm sky twinkled like a chopped lagoon.
“ This world is but a foggy circumstance,”
He thought, “ where timid mortals must advance

To claim their rights and drain what cup of joy
It has to offer, now no longer boy
I'll cease to play the rôle of Tantalus,
But leave this place, discharge a blunderbuss
Against my present drawling mode of life.
I'm still too young to bear the plague of wife,
And though 'tis true, when all fine things be said,
I'm welcome to a partner for my bed,
To kiss a gaping throat of flaccid silk ;
I fear her plump white breasts would hold no milk
To suckle babes on, after I had done
With kissing at her nipples ; one by one
Each new-born babe would wither up and die."

He picked his teeth and fetched a windy sigh,
Informed his father of his bold resolve,
Who told him of the cost it would involve :
So, settling up accounts, he bade farewell
To all the damned of his domestic hell.

Oh *wagon-lits* and tickets bought from Cook's,
Surpassing all the fairy-tales in books !
Warm exhalations, streets with spicy smells
And oh, the Poe-like harmonies of bells !
Venice and Ruskin and *The Deadly Lamps*,
The pulsing cafés and patchouli'd vamps
With sticky flowers in their copper hair,
The languid music throbbing on the air !

The Watteau *fêtes galantes*, the bistre-brown
Sombrero'd poets, yet without a crown
To purchase food ; the graceful unwashed hands
And flung-proud gestures of these Southern lands !
The tiny shiny shoes with pointed tips
And carmine-rouged¹ pursed petulance of lips !
But all the while the young man's pockets burned,
And all the while he piteously yearned
For lucre ; many azure nights he'd lain
With shirt-front soaked and squelching in champagne
And pleasures, money, all are volatile,
For after belching Pol-Roger the bile
Will wreak revenge.

And thus it came about

That when his full supply had given out,
The harlots would no longer share his bed ;
Since he could pay no cash, they, laughing, said :
“ One sucks the orange, throws away the peel.”
The young man's vanity forbade him kneel
As penitent before his father's glare,
Before the well-staged patronising stare
Of his familiar family—poor things—
How they would love to clip his phoenix-wings !

So he became a labourer and slept
In musty garrets where the grey mice crept,

With cobwebs and the gibbering of bats
And scuttling cockroaches, and lice, and rats
Who dragged their heavy bellies on the floor
Thud, thud and thud ; the creaking of the door
In twilight cavernous, the broken pane
Through which the hiss and crackle of the rain
Would slant in rivulets across the planks,
The thunder tramped, the lightning played his pranks
Like a young leopard prancing from the skies
Divinely, whilst the tough wind slapped its thighs.

Through dismal days he sweated at the plough.
And half a crust beneath an apple-bough
Became his nourishment, and so he thinned
In figure-line ; the sweltering east wind
And thick-flamed sun had bronzed his body quite . . .
And often through the oozing hours of night
He'd sing a sparkling catch of better times—
No longer pedant à propos of rhymes,

He'd hum or whistle : “ Gosh, she looks immense,
You never met a girl like sweet Hortense,”
With genuine emotion in his throat.
But soon he was reduced to pawning coat
And hat ; dismissed for superflux of dreams
Or bathing on hot afternoons in streams
When there was corn to reap, or hay to store
In soporific barns ; and all the more

He dreamt of silken harlots, velvet wine.
A tender farmer let him tend the swine.

With weighty flanks well caked in slime, a sow
Grunted and suckled farrow, whilst a cow
Lowed like a mellow snore ; a mastiff whined
To demonstrate sheer vacancy of mind.
“ Shall I arise and go ? 'tis not too late
To gain an entrance to my father's gate.”
The young man shook his head and muttered “ No,
Nor shall arise, nor to my father go.”
He had acquired a preference to dine
On scraps amongst the confidential swine.

Ventilation

O PEN the window ! now that breezes play
Over the wrinkled hills ; the sweltering day
Fused by the wedge-shaped engines of the sun
With heat intensive, split as flowers spun
Of glass to myriad particles minute
With spot-like swiftness, hovers chilled and mute.

Now that no far voice cleaves the air or blurs,
No splash, no fall of oars, no rumour stirs,
And life itself has long outbreathed its lungs—
(Or so it seems, for no dim amorous tongues
Trouble the foliage, and the moon is full,
Unflecked by wind-froth) ; all seems sorrowful
With beauty exanimate, a beauty dead,
A subterranean silence where vague dread
Puckles the brooding soul until it weeps
Terrible heavy tears. The garden sleeps . . .
Sleeps as the desolate magnificence
Of Angkor with its grave mute eloquence
Where blistering suns, invectives of the wind
Hurl vainly ; frenzied storms undisciplined
Beat, plunge inanely at the steadfast walls.
And no sad throat of nightingale entralls
The quickly-pulsing heart with turbulent song.

So massive has the stillness grown, so strong
A blood-vessel would burst, a muscle snap,

A sane malt mind would rave, grow weak as pap . . .
Oh aching ears, have you too heard the lips
Of silence utter some apocalypse
To slake the agony of my desires,
To scatter them like ashes of the pyres
Of calcined and cremated limbs ? but hark
In the faint failing distances what spark
Of flashed sound quivers ? hold your breath, what
flush
Of fluid moan ? The sluice is opened ; rush
And avalanche of panic-writhing cries.
Some soul in anguish is it ? vague surmise
As of some tragedy—I shudder, shake
With fear. . . .

It is the peacocks by the lake !

After

THE sky is very blue to-day,
And the soft turf yields
To each well-fitting shoe ; so they
Bring their bananas and sandwiches
To munch on the battle-fields.

O, why has Nature taken such a sheen,
Why does the grass grow green,
So cruelly green ?
O, surely it must wither in the spate
Of clashing contumacious worlds of agony and hate !
How can the sun keep pace so ? why not reel,
White steel,
Or stagger ankleted with yawning fire
Neath the tremendous byre ?
But the absurd courageous clouds
Look on, look on
In bustling business crowds,
They con
A Masse-Mensch imaginary power.
They do not cower
Before the charabancs' toot toot a toot
And men who bring their sandwiches to boot,
And break beer-bottles where men's souls were torn
By invisible billion hands . . . where agony was
born.

There is a lady in an orange gown.

(Did' not those shrieks hang airily down,
Suspended for eternity to hear,
A thousand tired stars over a shattered town
Not formed enough to speak, but formed enough to
shriek
And formed enough to make men fear ?)

Not so. The roses dangle deep asleep,
Men play Bo-peep
With poor worn-out banalities,
Sentimentalities,
Tepid-with-languor-lilies
And daffodillies.
We shall have each wind-melody dictated
And by Puccini orchestrated,
And from innumerable Noah's arks
Those little gasps of men make little gasp remarks
And puff Abdullas in their elegant central parks.

A cross . . . a cross . . . and row on row the same
Small cross without a name,
Each silhouette so slim
And, God, how ghastlily trim !
And down beneath the skeletons are piled.
 . . . But now a child
Discovering some fraction of a bomb,

Adventure-wild,
Performs a jig with exquisite aplomb
Over, who knows ? a corpse or mandrake root
(What matters it ?) the charabancs toot-toot,
The sky's so very blue to-day
And the soft turf yields
To each well-fitting shoe : and they
Bring their bananas and sandwiches
To munch on the battle-fields.

Green grow the Rushes, O

AND do the rushes grow so green
Upon this chill All Hallows' E'en
That voices as a lutany
Surge through my window-panes to die ?

For in this room of rot and rust
These dark red circles filled with dust,
These sodden and lead-heavy eyes
Long stunned with muted symphonies,

Are racked with the old hunger, hung
With memory's hard ice-flakes, stung
By each note-star in crystal set
To glint and pierce this lazaret.

O, why not let me wallow, bleed,
Riot and Guzzle in red greed,
And leave my doom-gripped body tossed
Into an agony of frost ?

Cruel, marauding throats, begone !
Before I hurl my curse upon
Your youth, oh loathsome things, to try
Torturing me with purity !

Words

IN long prim rows the formal words distend,
Stuffed birds with loosely-fitting beaks, they glare
With beady eyes pathetically vague
Beneath their sober domes of dusty glass.
(Pale frigid flute-voiced children promenade
To suck the air into their fading lungs,
Native to soot : the tortoise-shell effect
Of sunsets barred by buildings smug and bare
And sleek pat streets of asphalt : gamins drab
Whose nightingales the Cockney sparrows are.
When fury frost hangs white about the chin,
These too will cough a dirge, no doubt, and die !)
O words, assert yourselves ! from long prim rows
Trip out and weave new patterns with the clouds
That preen their swan-wings spread upon the air,
Then loll like tufts of lilac heavily ;
Lush coolness, limpid nebulousness ; where
The dove-tame zephyrs leap in shapely loops
To fill the windy trammel of a skirt,
Or must we oil you with celebral sweat ?
When levers, springs and cogs are oiled you'll come
Naked and unembarrassed by the moon.

.

The words have answered, lo, the words advance
No longer blocked in patterns, dribble out
In pleasant drops, with bird-quick flickers trip

Into a dissonance or discord : so,
Sharp darts of dappled sound to cleave the ear.
Some strut, and laughing madly, stridently,
These crack their wind-swift fingers, or like ants
Waving antennæ, struggle bravely on
Beneath their heavy burdens, one or two
Twinkle, then flutter off like hueless leaves,
Or dart and flash like wagtails on a pool,
Some fired with sulphurous glow, and some askew
Sway perilously, like a drunkard's hat.
But what are these with puckered, pointed ears
That flit among the crowds like strips of tape ?
They seem to stumble into tragedies.
“ Oh, we shall twine you merry wreaths,” they say,
“ Gay wreaths, festoons of entrails for your brow ! ”
Their eyes like little glasses of liqueur
Glitter and frighten me : within, without,
Words with hot breath hiss subtly venomous,
A million droning insects in my ears,
A million mottled thrushes in my mind.

Greenness Unsecreted

IN ombre gateways I had loitered, stopped
To speak unto my nearest brother, Toad,-
Within the forest where the cobras propped
 Green twists on frothy treetops, their abode :
“ Toad, I salute you ! in your chilly eye
I see the mignonette of modesty.”

He did not answer, crouching like a sin,
 Steeped in a lethargy too dull to pierce,
Centuple wisdom folded in his skin—
 He stared with humble stare that was not fierce,
And yet within that stare I seemed to know
 The stare that maddened Hieronymo.

I followed then a wedge of thoughtful cranes
 Who fled across the silence drearily
From desolations and eternal rains
 Across the frozen ridge of Rhodope,
The stars grown piteous of my misery
Dropped golden tears into the poem-sea.

I have since dived, bathed in the poem-sea,
 In spilt genethliacs of amber wine
Mellowed to milk, like turtle-feathers free
 Floating and flurry on the teasing brine,

Below, I saw those youths that died of love
And wandered with them in the myrtle grove.¹

And when I rose a slender oaten pipe
Made music in the entrails of my ears,
Rich bandaliers of fruit grown pulpy-ripe
Moistened the membranes and dissolved my fears,
I could remember at her day of birth
How Flora with her daisies strewed the earth.

But man still chased his jet-black butterflies,
And looking up, as from a rippled cloud,
Shunned me with viscous terror in his eyes,
Then fell a-triply sewing at his shroud,
Lest I should mar the self-fomenting strife
And cultivated void that was his life.

¹ These two lines are derived from Pope.

Back-Streets

INANE perspective stretched behind the street :
A wall, a yard, a wall, a yard, a wall,
Patterned interminably, patterned neat
With intervals of oblongs squat and tall.

A full moon dims the stars and here and there
Glints on a bulging square of window-pane.
Soon clinging sodden moistures glut the air
And mists fall heavier than autumn rain.

Only one room of all these rooms is lit.
Perhaps somebody watches, dreams absurd
And sentimental dreams, and from this pit
The ponderous bourdon of some heart is stirred.

Men live their packed exasperated lives,
Callosus and unfamiliar, yet each knows,
In all these sordid chiaroscuro hives,
His neighbour's pleasures and his neighbour's woes.

Through gutters of stagnations and defeats,
Immense black ruins with the beds unmade,
Interminable agonising streets,
I walk alone, a stranger, and afraid

Werther-Introspection

“Talk to me somewhat quickly,
Or my imagination will carry me
To see her in the shameful act of sin.”
Duchess of Malfi.

THE morning drums upon the window-pane,
The evening drums upon the window-pane,
I wait and wait and fumble in my brain. . . .

All night I've lain with soul that could not rest.
At dusk strange hands were tearing at my heart
In a prim polar silence.

The stags and does may frolic in the woods
And leap beyond the stars, for aught I care,
Beyond those furbished clots of frigid light,
Abstract and sad detached identities,
Where they may anguish, fossilize or freeze.

All night I've lain upon the charming rack
You manufactured : I shall not despair,
Or coax a courteous isolated tear.
But I shall hear my agonizing laughter
Echoing far from floor to trembling rafter
In brittle carillons like metal bells,
And hear my bleached emaciated yells
Burgeon in petalled peals, flamboyant, bright

As merry moons in petticoats of white
To hide their cancer and their leprosy.

Then : “ Patience, rebel, calm ! ” the darkness said,
“ You’ll never choke time’s throat of beaten lead ”
I did not heed. . . . I knew that my heart bled.

Near the pellucid lake—ah God, there stirred
No animalculus, and an absurd
Decorous silence humped its back and purred.

On the Theme of Ophelia's Madness

“ **A**ND will he not come again ? ”

Ophelia wanders out into the rain
That makes soft music on her yellow hair.
“ O, shall I then surrender to despair ? ”
In vain she begs the strutting chanticleer
And Tullia’s intellectual marmosyte,
King Oberon a-lying on his bier
And Leda’s downy swan.

Throughout the night

She listens to the noise of dead men’s bones,
Sad subterranean murmurs drowned in sea-weed,
Slow-drifting down jade silences. . . .

—She hopes to screw some answer from their groans !
But there’s a seal upon their lipless mouths.

“ By all the moons that in the peacock’s tail
Rival the heaven’s moon,
I conjure a reply ; has any seen
My lover’s sandal-shoon ?
He wears a fluted cockle-hat,
A staff of briar-wood,
His hair’s coiled thick in a flaxen mat,
And like a river in flood
The crisp locks tumble on his poll.”
She cried but there came no answer at all
Save, God ha’ mercy on his soul !

“ By molewarp’s brain and by pismire’s gall,
Will he whom I love return again ? ”
The pale grey rain
For pity’s sake,
Breathed her asleep in a lullaby,
Till slothful Charon in his barge rowed by
And ferried her gently over the Stygian lake.

These Consolations

I. SHALL console myself by being absurd

And sit among the rank, unwholesome dews,
And watch each whining pheasant and each bird
Guzzle the very-human bearded grain :
I shall not weep beneath the dismal yews
But to the milk-white turtles tune my pain.

Where spiny pines diffuse a noxious shade
I'll wage a series of intestine wars,
The listening wolves grow milder in the glade
Beneath the incense of the breathing Spring,
Whilst every shepherd polishes his sores
I'll languish into life, and living, sing.

The women teem their babes ; the sative plants
Quiver as Cynthia fills her silver horn,
The spicy forest and her sycophants,
The fiery-pointed organons of sense,
Attempt to catch the sound as it is born
And, as it dies, the hush is thick and tense.

But even so the tensity can vex
What I had hoped had blackened into jet,
Like raven-feathers in the moon's reflex,
The feeble eyes of our aspiring thoughts,
But even so the tensity can fret,
And I must grope in unsuspected orts . . .

I shall console myself with being fed
On hollow sapless tales and other slips,
And to the pallid nations of the dead
I'll wander, and as soon as I arise
A liquid film will glaze upon my lips,
Upon my pores, impatient for the skies.

*In the Month of Athyr*¹

THESE ruins seem a womb of cringing air,
So thin that the ears tingle, flickering,
And every barren plant is withering,
Ready to snap, like glass, for sheer despair . . .
And through the ether mountains loom like bones
So hollow you could scrape a melody
Sounding like water from them, oozily
To this sun-stricken desert-world of groans.
The light is cruel : it is hard to read
The letters on these stones, but, lo, the words :
“*Lord Jesus Christ*” and further “*soul*” ; what
birds
Erased the script with droppings ? and what weed
Has wrested from these crevices a home ?
“*In month of Athyr*” . . . “*Lucius fell asleep*” . . .
His age is mentioned : he was young ; and deep
Beneath the damaged parts, as in a foam
Of centuries I see, disfigured, “*tears.*”
Then “*tears*” again, “*for us his friends who weep*” . . .
Lucius was much belovèd, it appears.
In grey November . . . Lucius fell asleep. . . .

¹ The ancient Egyptian November (derived from a poem by C. P. Cavafy).

Discoveries

WE have discovered many things
To suit our moods, to give us wings :
More than an Aristotle-tome
In crimson splash of a fowl's comb,
In silver-boled unleaving trees
Like organ-pipes along the breeze ;
Sometimes the notes run sharp and false
When rooks and twigs join in the valse
Of smooth and swaying treetop spun
Like yarn across the copper sun. . . .
But there are times when you would cry
To hear the trees' low melody.
And we have watched the hemlock spray
And smelt dank wafture of decay,
The fume from tawny bellied leaves
In spirals where the autumn grieves.
With froth of flowers we have been rich—
The globuled frog-spawn on the ditch
Was mottled with our wonder ; vast
Moist moans of raping bees' repast
Have sluiced our languid afternoons
Like ripples crawling on lagoons.
But we have not discovered yet
How to erase, how to forget
Sheer vividness of solitude,
How to obliterate each mood
To dim Antarctic memories,
Merged icebergs twinkling in chopped seas.

Old Woman

G AUNT woman with pinched, palsied hands,
Cramped fingers once their nimble slaves,
Did your poor feet once print the sands
With lovely dimpled curves like waves ?

I'm told men once would march to wars,
Your name upon their lips, would kneel
Rapt by your eyes that fleered the stars,
Where passions leapt like sparks from steel.

I'm told snow hawthorn massed in bloom
Could not cool whiter than your hands,
Or candles crackling up the gloom
Of churches in chill twilit lands.

Gaunt woman, why so tense your mouth ?
Is it your blistered heart that speaks ?
Did colour fluid as the South
Light those emaciated cheeks ?

I'm told your voice once trembled clear
And frail withal as linnet's wings. . . .
And now your voice is but the mere
Vague echo of forgotten things.

*“ Once lovers bruised each blue-veined breast
And charred my body as 'twere coal.
Now I would lay me down to rest.
May Christ receive my wrinkled soul ! ”*

Cold Joints

I

IN mental constipation shivering,
He went into the fields, where he could sing
To ease the sobbing of his plangent mind,
With desolate, cracked voice, for they were kind.
The sky an ashen cup of neutral air ;
Black specks of surly rooks whirred cawing there
And sombre clots of writhing, stunted trees
Stretched withered fingers, creaking traceries
Of mazed arms multitudinous ; their moan
A memory that he was not alone.

Upon the gravel path small frosted stars
Glittered and bleared ; the rusty railing-bars
Were furred with silver lichen as the down
Bristled upon a dead man's throat ; a crown
Of Gothic spires through lustrous distance crept.
The world and all its wedge-shaped engines slept.

Disturbed, he heard the crunch of footsteps fast
And looking up, he saw two men that passed.
“Good-morning, Mr. Gosling.” “Oh, good-day !”
“Bit nippy weather !” then strode on their way
With patch-work quilted minds and bowler hats,
With Sunday journal, gloves and yellow spats,

Into the distance . . . while the echoes bear
“ Bit nippy weather ” drifting down the air.

II

Up, silver man nid-nodding by the hearth !
The languid summer has trailed out her days . . .
For this night leave your bible, leave your path
Of selfish righteousness ; delay your praise
Of God till He has given you a seat
Amongst the flapping angels. (Fire and sleet
And candle-light
And Christ receive thy soul.)

Well, these are facts, even if impolite—
As trite and boring as the price of coal.
The lyke-wake dirge comes after ; now you live—
Too old for fornication—that is true.
But you may love the slender fleeting things,
The terrible music of the slipping hours,
If sordid Life has nothing else to give.
In each clock-tick there is a something new—
Unsatiated sweet imaginings,
Pianola dreams or orchidaceous flowers !
And though you shiver in a slow decay,
You still have guts and marrow, though your limbs
Be well-nigh licked of blood, you need not stay
For ever by the fire and croon cracked hymns !

The children gloze and fleech him all in vain—
The taxi throbs outside.

“ I hope the rain
Won’t spoil the fireworks.”

Granpa’s left behind
With baby and the adenoided nurse.
The maid moves in to draw the window blind.
Her lips compressed have never known a curse.
Amazed, she sees frail drops are trickling down
What she had ever held to be a mask.
Half-pitying the old exhausted man
So infantine, yet sitting all alone
As in blue forest depths a mossy stone,
Where toads crouch like the voice in gramophone,
She brings him crumpets and a cup of tea.

III

“ He’s got hot lips when he plays jazz.”
How trite and obvious ; of course he has !
Sex blossoms on the lips as well as other parts,
If not, he is unworthy of an entrance to our hearts.
And you invite spontaneous destruction
For splitting chips which form so tiresome an obstruc-
tion
To our imaginative possibilities.
No half-dissembled grey tranquillities
Of mental judgment ! We want elephants,

Tough-grained calamities, to clamber up on ;
To travel petulantly bump-a-bump, to sup on
Champagne and slippery flesh of oysters,
And conversational quips and roysters
With childishly garrulous termagants.
And in their company you'll find it pays
To polish up the petals of a phrase !

Invocation

UPON this flat, misshapen day
My weary sullen thoughts grow grey—
Grey waters, and grey, sunless cliffs,
Bleak gaiety of flowers, whiffs
Of loneliness, ah loneliness
To ever clasp in my caress.
And shall I, poor mazed lunatic,
When memories come crowding thick,
Dangle a silly mandrake-root,
Swinging upon Time's parachute ?
Can thoughts have colours, colours thoughts,
Or do I wander midst the orts
Of half-forgotten nightmare-pyres ?
We poets have exchanged our lyres
For heart-strings. We have souls to save
From boredom ; come then, let's be brave
And sing the baser passions, sing
Until the blood jerked up will ring
A matins for our lusts and shames,
And men will tingle at our names.

Lame Lady

A POOR lame lady limps along
Low sloping fields of tender green,
She'd love to break into a song
Or dance, a figure slim, serene.

All nature seems a parquet floor
To please the sense, to please the eye,
And Lazarus forgets each sore
Beneath the thickly-coated sky.

The poor lame lady senses whole
The shafts of coloured warmth arise,
A thirsty solitude of soul
Looms in her vague pathetic eyes.

The hollow spells of Spring are fleet
And quick thoughts clatter through her head . . .
“ An awkward duck with webbèd feet ! . . .
Ah ! better far to lie a-bed.”

In bed her lameness will not leer,
For Sleep's compassionate and kind,
And she will dance and sing and hear
The crooning of a phantom wind.

For then her body's cage-doors wide
Are opened, and the spirit free
Flutters, and in a burst of pride
•Dances before Eternity.

Conversations and Crumbling

“ **W**ELL, here we are. I venture to believe
We have not met since Venice . . . seven
years . . .

My sons were killed, and I was left to grieve
With Adelaide and Fanny . . . they are dears.”
I look around and find two fleshy ears
Dangling a pair of ear-rings . . . it’s a phase . . .
But all the same I wish that they’d wear stays.

When Regent Street is up I always feel
That London Bridge is also falling down,
Symbolic hulks of granite, orange peel,
And somebody who’s losing half-a-crown. . . .
It is so queer, so queer, to live in town . . .
And then I see myself and purse my lips
“ With no more conscience than a snake has hips.” ¹

Yes, here am I bathed in a maudlin smile !
And here are : you, he, it, and everyone
Except the person who’s alone worth while.
Calmly I rise with broken threads, I run
Stirred by my own intrinsic power to sun
Self-consciousness to flesh-burst—I’ve begun
With unabated sarcasm to rise
In self-opinion, sinking with closed eyes.

¹ A line from “ Louisville Lou ”: a certain fox-trot.

A subtle crepitation in the air
As if the nomad camels would return,
As if the burly lion left his lair
To have his hair curled daintily. I burn.
You do not listen : "there's so much to learn
From scientific data, palimpsest. . . ."
I tell you they will crumble with the rest.

Before the wolf returns to Regent Street,
Before he digs up fashionable tombs,
Before the nightingale with music sweet
Pierces the Piccadilly catacombs,
Before the screech-owl adds to ruin-glooms,
The merry robin-redbreast and the wren
Will trill their notes in Bayswater again.

"The worst of influenza's over now,
But rents are high . . . the weather is not cold
Considering the month of year, but how
The war has broken through our lives ! how old " . . .
Above her grave time soon will rake the mould :
Already she is smouldering away,
Already she is fettled for decay.

Pleasures and vanities, regrets, desires
Dumped on a dung-heap where the lilies grow. . . .
And these shall be their own sad funeral-pyres,

Destruction totters and his steps are slow.
The miles to Babylon ? I do not know.
But this I know : these folk on gilded chairs
Had better kneel and say their hopeless prayers.

Intermezzo

THAT sinister, that sombre poet-waif
• Presses his brow against the window-pane,
(That window-pane of cruel, wicked glass),
Watching the sour and curdled flakes of snow.
With eyes like pale grey membranes fixed and glazed
Ever he stares upon snow-silent fields,
And sweating skies that lean towards the earth
Like a great toper leaning at a bar.
Ever the mournful cries of mountain-apes
Echo, re-echo, and abysmally,
Ever the sour snow falls. And where's the moon ?
It must hang high, oh, somewhere in the heavens.
And somewhere, waking in the middle night
Soft longing arms spread out in love's embrace
Find nothing, no one ; in a dazed despair
Grope for a form to clasp, to touch, and then
Fall limply back in dismal loneliness.
Perpetual Penelopes unspin
The webs they spun meticulous at day.
Somewhere the honey-throated nightingale
Is voiceless for the burden of his love,
And somewhere it is good to be alive. . . .

That sinister, that sombre poet-waif
So tired to tears and tearless, with those eyes

Airily floating in eternal stare,
Bartered his soul for void philosophies.
But suddenly he flings a weary laugh
And walks into the jangling painted world.

THREE TRANSLATIONS FROM THE FRENCH

(FOR EDITH SITWELL)

I

The Gibbet

(DERIVED FROM ALOYSIUS BERTRAND)

O H, do I hear the night-raped wind
Who screams in travail, do I hear
The blunt ropes of the gibbet grind,
The hanged man's writhing sigh so drear ?

Oh, can it be some cricket's song
Vibrating shrill amongst the weeds
And sterile moss ? throughout the long
Finned languid hours when summer bleeds

Outstretched and pallid on a bier.
Oh, can it be some spot-swift fly
Who winds his horn round each deaf ear ?
Some beetle plucking stealthily

A morsel of corrupting flesh,
A trailing wisp, a bleeding hair,
Until his spirit, fed and fresh,
Will bid him frisk upon the air ?

Oh, can it be some spider squat
Who sings and sows at half an ell
Of satin, for a new cravat
To deck his strangled throat in Hell ?

It is the clock which tinkles down
The hour to the crumbling town.
It is a hanged man's carcass spun
With crimson by the setting sun.

Saints.

(AFTER MALLARMÉ)

HIGH at a window
Of old gilded sandalwood
Where once the viol
Mingled with dulcimer,

Sits the Saint pallid,
The missal of parchment
Lies open where vespers
And complines were chaunted :

At monstrance-glazing
Grazed by the Angel's
Harp curved by winging
Aloft on the twilight

For her delicate fingers,
On instrument's plumage
She balances soft,
A musician of silence.

Hérodiade

TRANSLATED FROM MALLARMÉ

Scene

The Nurse—Hérodiade

NURSE. You live, Princess? or do I see your shade?

Your fingers at my lips and all their rings
Cease to proceed in an unlearned-of age . . .

HÉRODIADE. Recede.

The immaculate blond torrent of my hair
Freezes my limbs with horror when it bathes
Their solitude, and interlaced with light
My hair's immortal. Me a kiss would murder,
Would kill, if beauty were not death, oh woman . . .
Driven by what allurement, should I know?

What morn forgotten by the prophets pours
O'er dying distances, these dismal feasts?
And you have seen me enter, nurse of winter,
The heavy prison built of stone and iron
Where aged lions drag the centuries,
And fatal, I advanced, with shielded hands,
Through desert-perfume of these ancient kings:
But have you still beheld my very dread?
I stop to dream of exiles, and I strip,
As near a pond whose gush of water welcomes,

The pallid lilies in me, smitten, charmed
My eyes pursue the languor of the wreck
Descend, in silence, through my reverie,
The lions part my indolence of robe
And gaze on feet whose curves would calm the sea.
Quiet the shudder of your crumbling flesh,
And mimicking the fashions of my hair
So fierce that makes you fear their shock of manes,
Come, help, as thus you dare no longer see me,
Within a mirror nonchalantly combing.

NURSE. My child, unless you wish to sample myrrh
Gay in its sealèd bottles, would you prove
The grave funereal virtue of the essence
Ravished from roses' dim senility ?

HÉRODIADE. Leave there those perfumes ! Nurse,
do you not know

I hate them, do you wish me then, to feel
My languid frame drown in their drunkenness ?
I crave : my hair of flowers not created
To strew oblivion of human anguish,
But gold, for ever virgin of the spices,
In cruel flashes and in heavy pallor,
Will mark the sterile chilliness of metals,
Having reflected you, my native jewels,
Vases and arms, from solitary childhood.

NURSE. Pardon, oh queen, for age eclipsed the plea
With which you deign to vindicate my mind
Grown sallow as an old or gloomy book . . .

HÉRODIADE. Enough ! before me hold this mirror.
Mirror !

Cold water frozen hard within your frame
By weariness ; how often, dream-tormented
And searching for my memories, like leaves
Beneath the hole profound within your ice,
In you I seemed a shadow, but, what horror
At dusk when in your fountain I have known
The nudity of my dishevelled dream !

Nurse, am I beautiful ?

NURSE. In truth, a star,
But this tress tumbles . . .

HÉRODIADE. Check in your offence
Which chills my blood towards its source, and quell
This gesture of notorious irreligion :
Tell me, in grim emotion what sure demon
Throws you this kiss, these perfumes, should I
breathe it ?

And, oh my heart, this hand still sacrilegious,
Since I believe you wished to touch me, say
They are a day which will not be extinguished
Without calamity upon the tower . . .

Oh day Hérodiade beholds with dread !

NURSE. Indeed, a strange day, from which heaven
guard you !

You wander, lonely shadow, recent passion,
Looking within you, premature in terror :
Even as an immortal exquisite,

And hideously beautiful, my child

As . . .

HÉRODIADE. Were you not about to touch me ?

NURSE. I would belong to him, for whom the Fates
Reserve your secrets.

HÉRODIADE. Oh ! be silent !

NURSE. Sometimes

He'll come, perchance ?

HÉRODIADE. I pray you, do not listen,
Innocent stars !

NURSE. How else, 'mid sombre terrors
To dream a suppliant, more implacable,
That god the treasure of your grace attends !
For whom, devoured of agony, you guard
The mystery, vain splendour of your being ?

HÉRODIADE. For me.

NURSE. Sad flower seen with atony
In water, doleful flower that grows alone,
Nor has anxiety but cloudy sound.

HÉRODIADE. Go, keep your pity with your irony.

NURSE. Expound however : no, ingenuous child,
Some day this scorn triumphant will diminish . . .

HÉRODIADE. But who would touch me, reverenced
of lions ?

Besides, I want no human thing ; if, chiselled,
You see me with eyes lost in Paradise,
'Tis when I call to mind your milk of yore.

NURSE. Oh lamentable victim to its fate !

HÉRODIADE. Yes, it is for myself, deserted, that I
flower !

Gardens of amethyst, you know too well—
Fled without end into the wise abysms
Dazzled and dazed ; you unawared-of golds
Who guard your antique mellowness of light
Beneath the sombre slumber of a soil
Primordial and primitive ; and you
Oh stones from which my pure and jewel eyes
Borrow their melody of clarity ;
You, metals, which surrender to my hair
A fatal splendour and its massive gait !
Woman who speak of mortal, as for you,
Created in malignant centuries,
Born for the spite of caverns sybilline !
According as from calyx of my clothes
The white thrill of my nudity emerge,
Aroma of the fierce, the savage joys—
Woman who speak of mortal ! prophesy
That if the tepid azure of the summer,
To whom the woman natively unveils,
Sees me in starlike shivering chastity,
I die !

I love the dread of being virgin
And I desire to live the terror of my hair—
To sense, inviolate reptile, on my couch
At evening, stir within my useless flesh
The frigid sparkle of your pallid lucence,

O you who die calcined with chastity,
White night of icicles and cruel snow !
And your lone sister, oh eternal sister,
My dream will mount towards you airily :
Already as the rare limpidity
Of one who dreamt it, in my native-land
Monotonous, I think myself alone,
And all around me lives in the idolatry
That in a mirror's dozing calm reflects
Hérodiade of clear and diamond gaze . . .
Yea, last of spells ! I feel it, I'm alone.

NURSE. And will you die then, Madam ?

HÉRODIADE. Grandmother, no,
Be calm : withdrawing, pardon this flint heart,
But, if you wish, first close the shutters fast,
Seraphic azure smiles within the pane's
Profundity. I loathe the lovely azurc.
The waters lull themselves and, over there,
Do you not know a country where the sky,
So sinister, has all the heated looks
Of Venus who is burning in the leaves
At evening ? I'll thither . . .

Light these tapers,
Mere childishness, you say, whose nimble flames
Weep a strange weeping 'mid the empty gold
And . . .

NURSE. Now ?

HÉRODIADE. Farewell.

You lie, oh naked flower of my lips !
For I await a thing unheard of yet.
Perhaps unconscious of their mystery,
Unconscious of your cries, you hurl the sobs
Supreme and bruisèd of an infancy
Perceiving dimly 'mid its reveries
Those frozen gems that separate at last.